

Historic, Archive Document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.

U.S. Department of Agriculture
Office of the Secretary

Sept. 7, 1965

Eastern Chpt. of Nat'l.

Agric Adv. & Marketing Assoc.

USDA AND THE COMMUNICATIONS PROBLEM

U. S. DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE
NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL LIBRARY
FEB 20 1970
C & R-PREP.

I have come here today to ask your help.

You are in the business of communications, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture has a communications problem.

We often feel that we are just not getting through to the American people -- but then no one knows better than you do the difficulties involved in getting a message across to 195 million people.

Don't think the USDA is unappreciative of the help we've received on specific programs and activities from the industries represented here today. The advertising industry has given us some invaluable aid -- Smokey Bear being the notable example. The news media, too, have cooperated in many ways. They have long been the mainstay in disseminating USDA market news reports on going prices, supply, and demand for farm products. They have given wide support to "Plentiful Foods" campaigns through which we try to stimulate sales of foods which are in especially heavy supply. And I could name many more examples.

But our problem lies deeper. We have apparently not yet succeeded in getting across to the public the basic message that the Department of

Address by Deputy Assistant Secretary of Agriculture Trienah Meyers at the first meeting of the Eastern Chapter of the National Agricultural Advertising and Marketing Association, Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, New York, N.Y., Tuesday, September 7, 1965, 12:15 p.m.

Agriculture serves both the producer and the user of farm products -- in other words, everybody.

The USDA today provides a greater variety of services for more people than any other agency of our government, any industry, or any organization in the world. Its activities touch the lives of every American at least three times a day and have impact around the world. And in a multitude of unobtrusive but very real ways the work of the USDA is woven into the fabric of our every-day living.

Quite frankly, the work of this Department must have the broadly-based support of the public if it is to continue to serve the interests of that public as effectively in the future as it has in the past.

Perhaps part of our difficulty may be in our name. Advertising people tell us that the naming and packaging of the product can be a pretty important means of communication.

From the first, the U.S. Department of Agriculture was designed to be, as Lincoln called it, the "people's department." Yet today most people don't think of agriculture as being relevant to their interests.

I don't know whether the solution is to change the name, or to keep the name and try to regain its full meaning. Our present name hardly does make clear the fact that over two-thirds of USDA funds and personnel are devoted to services that are of primary benefit to the general public. But many people want to retain the old and honored name, giving it the broad interpretation that President Lincoln intended.

There is no doubt, however, that we have a problem in getting understanding that the "farm problem" and "farm policy" and the work of the USDA are not something remote and apart from the lives of all of our citizens.

People need to know that these are matters which affect their standard of living, our strength as a nation, and, indeed, our relationships with the rest of the world. They need to know that involved are flesh-and-blood issues of how the nation's farm resources may best be utilized in the service of 195 million citizens.

They need to know, further, that the farm income problem is important to them because farm-city relationships are reciprocal -- farmers are a huge market for the products of urban industry.

Moreover, it should be more widely understood that production is only half of the farm and food story in our modern age. Today the marketing of farm products is as important to both producers and consumers as their production.

To an ever-increasing degree, the cost of marketing determines the price that all of us pay for our food and other products of farm origin. Marketing of farm products today costs three times as much as their production and employs twice as many people.

The Department of Agriculture's concern with marketing has grown along with the process itself. It was fitting, therefore, that earlier this year we announced a new USDA agency -- the Consumer and Marketing Service.

(more)

USDA 2705-65

There was more news to this event than most people realized. What it signified, really, was recognition that the marketing of farm products has become a major area of food and farm policy.

It marked recognition, also, that our nation has reached a stage in its development where it can -- and it does -- serve the interests of consumers in a way that was not possible in an earlier, more austere, age.

That is why the creation of the Consumer and Marketing Service has meaning to every person in this country -- this USDA agency is charged with giving force to the principle that our supply of food and other farm products shall move from producer to consumer quickly, efficiently, safely, economically -- and with fairness to all.

I want to tell you about this new agency because it illustrates not only a new direction in the orientation of the USDA but also something of the broad scope of Department services.

The Consumer and Marketing Service brings together most of the USDA action programs of service to consumers and those which aid and regulate the marketing system.

A major functional area is the consumer protection program -- such important activities as the inspection for wholesomeness of most of the nation's supply of meat and poultry. These services are one of the principal reasons that American consumers are often said to be the "best protected, most fortunate in the world."

Inspection for wholesomeness is required by Federal law for all meat and poultry products moving in interstate or foreign commerce. It not only assures the safety and healthfulness of these products but also provides a strict control on sanitation and on accuracy of labeling.

In addition, similar inspection is available for other foods -- fruit and vegetable products, egg products, and dairy products -- on a voluntary, fee-for-service basis. That these services are widely used is testimony to the interest and efforts of the food industry in providing consumers with good, clean, wholesome products.

In the Consumer and Marketing Service are centered also those services and regulatory programs which have long undergirded the competitive nature of our farm and food marketing system.

For many years, these behind-the-scenes marketing aids have worked well -- and silently -- serving equally the interests of farmers, marketers, and consumers. They have, in fact, though it has seldom been recognized, been a major contributing factor in the development of a farm and food production and marketing system that is the envy of the world.

These are services such as the daily -- and even hourly -- market news reports I referred to a few minutes ago -- a vital link in a fast-moving trade of perishable products. And the nationally-uniform standards of quality and grading services for all major farm products -- without which development of a modern, nation-wide marketing system would hardly have been possible. Because these services are being performed, American consumers can select meat or eggs or poultry according to quality

(more)

USDA 2705-65

plainly marked on the package or the product -- instead of having to accept the mish-mash of sizes and qualities one finds in the food markets of many nations.

The regulatory programs centered in C&MS cover a wide range. A little known fact is that USDA administers more regulatory laws than any other Government agency. Among the more important of the market regulation laws are those designed to safeguard competition in the marketing of livestock, meat, poultry, fruits, and vegetables -- products which are the major source of income for farmers and for which consumers spend the highest proportion of their food budget.

C&MS administers also a system of marketing orders, through which producers can voluntarily join together to achieve more orderly marketing, and more stable prices, for highly perishable products like milk and fresh fruits and vegetables.

It might seem from all this that we are about to enter Utopia. But such is not the case. Changes are occurring in the sizes, inter-relationships, and types of enterprise in our traditional marketing system -- changes that perhaps have contributed to efficiency but nevertheless create problems for many farmers and for the agency responsible for administering marketing services and regulation.

Some of the local markets on which farmers have depended for years are disappearing. Producers of some products no longer sell in a market to the highest bidder, but deliver under contract. The contract, signed in advance, specifies exactly what and how they shall produce, and where, when, and to whom they shall deliver the product --

at a price to be determined on the basis of some formula. This is for many farmers a new and unsettling arrangement.

Many wholesalers are disappearing, too. And the growth of retail organizations presents a dimension of size and influence previously unknown in U.S. agriculture. Demands to produce and market to narrow specification -- even if not under contract -- are also new to farmers.

I mention these changes neither in approval nor disapproval, but simply as illustrative of developments that perplex farmers and present a challenge to government officials charged with carrying out programs designed to service and regulate the traditional open market system. It is a real problem to know how to adapt these programs to ways of doing business that are quite different -- to adapt them, that is, so that they will continue to guard the place of independent enterprise in food production and marketing and serve the interests of both producers and consumers.

Concern about the dramatic reorganizations taking place in food marketing led last year to legislation establishing the National Commission on Food Marketing. The Commission, made up of 10 members of Congress and 5 distinguished private citizens, is charged with studying in detail and in depth the structure and performance of our marketing system -- such things as number and size of firms, the degree of concentration of business, and the extent of vertical integration. It is asked to weigh the goals of a good marketing system -- to look into not only the efficiency of the system and its services to consumers

but also whether it maintains competitive alternatives for buyers and sellers and an appropriate distribution of bargaining power. And it is asked to consider changes in statutes, policies, and regulatory activities of government that would contribute to these ends.

The questions involved go to the heart of our competitive enterprise system -- and for that reason affect not only farmers and the marketing industry itself, but the whole of society, including -- not least -- consumers.

These are some of the reasons that I think it is safe to say that the marketing of farm products is moving ever-closer to the center of the stage as a matter of farm and food policy -- and why consumers, producers, and marketers alike have a direct stake in the marketing services and regulatory programs of the Consumer and Marketing Service.

There is still another large area of Department of Agriculture service to consumers that was given increased emphasis and stature in the organization of the Consumer and Marketing Service. This is in the food programs that provide a means of sharing with those who are hungry the benefits of agricultural abundance. These programs are important also to farmers and marketers because they serve at the same time to expand both present and future markets for food.

Our Consumer Food Programs are carried out through several different activities -- the school lunch and special milk programs, the distribution of surplus foods, and the newest of the group, the Food Stamp Program which, in effect, stretches the food purchasing power of

(more)

USDA 2705-65

low income people in many communities. Surplus foods used in these programs, moreover, are always ready and available for emergencies -- whether caused by nature or by man. They were distributed in the aftermath of the Los Angeles riot just as they have been in the wake of many floods and hurricanes.

The importance now attached to all of these food programs is, to my mind, a mark of our maturity as a nation. They are being used on the front lines of our national war on poverty. And under the leadership of President Johnson, I believe they will continue to grow until we can say that we have won that war.

Just last week the Food Stamp Program was extended to another 68 localities in 23 states -- by next July we expect it will be aiding at least a million needy people.

The Food Stamp Program makes use of our efficient commercial distribution system -- and extends its benefits thereby to a whole community. The food donation program makes use of those commodities that are acquired in price support and surplus removal operations and gets them out to people who need them through state and local welfare operations. But both have the same purpose -- to enable those who are unable to buy an adequate diet to have the foods they need for good health and vigor -- and thus to help them become self-reliant and productive citizens. Growth of both these programs is evidence of the general awakening among us to the fact that we must help people to break out of the vicious circle of poverty that has too long held back too many.

Here in New York City, commodity distribution for needy families began in the fall of 1961. By December of that year, more than 200,000 persons were participating and by June of this year there were 285,000. The commodities distributed during the past year included canned beef, dry milk, butter, cheese, corn meal, peanut butter, rolled wheat, rice, lard, and flour. Their retail value averaged about \$6 per person per month -- a total value for the year of about \$18 million for just the foods distributed here in this City.

In addition, New York City is doing a top-notch job in making the National School Lunch Program available to its children. Some 375,000 youngsters enjoy these lunches daily in the City's schools -- and more than half of them, last year, received their lunches free.

We are trying very hard to get the school lunch program extended in cities and rural areas to the children who need it most. It's a difficult job because in many of these places the schools are in old buildings which lack the facilities for preparing and serving lunch.

But here in New York, some 130,000 children in such schools eat lunches prepared in a centralized kitchen and distributed throughout the City by truck every noon. This example could well be emulated in other areas.

We are making progress feeding hungry people. But we still have a long way to go. And there is no excuse in this nation for any person -- particularly any elderly person, or any school child, or any pre-school child -- to go hungry.

It is a great satisfaction to me -- to all of us in the Department of Agriculture -- that we are embarked on this great unfinished work of helping to meet the needs of our fellowman.

This, it seems to me, is another of the new directions in which farm policy is heading. We are recognizing that there is not just one "farm problem" -- but many. And these are problems affecting city people as much as -- if not more than -- farmers.

We are recognizing that the war on poverty must be fought in rural America -- where nearly half of our poverty is located -- as well as in the cities. Many of the urban problems we now face, in fact, are a result of rural problems that we have not dealt with in the past.

For too many years we have, as a nation, been indifferent toward a whole host of discriminations against rural areas. We have permitted farmers to subsidize our food prices. Yes, that is true. While every other segment of the economy was enjoying the benefits of a booming prosperity, farm incomes were about half of those of urban dwellers. Many farmers and farm workers have been simply harried out of the countryside and into an urban environment -- untrained, undereducated, and unprepared for what they would find there. This migration during the 1950's reached a rate of some 1 million persons a year.

We no longer, I am happy to say, think it is wise to drive people from rural areas into our already crowded and problem-filled cities. We are moving to bring economic opportunity to the countryside.

For one thing, American farmers are earning better incomes this year than at any time in the past 12 years. And I might add that even with a slight increase in food prices this year, American consumers are still spending a smaller proportion of their income for food than ever before. If the policies and programs which have contributed to this progress are continued, prospects for the years ahead look bright. Given these tools, we expect that by the end of this decade the family farmer with adequate resources will again be enjoying parity of income -- something he has not had since the late 1940's.

But only about one-fourth of the people living in rural areas are commercial farmers. And what we traditionally call "farm programs" are of little direct help to them. What they need are better opportunities -- for jobs, for education, for housing, for health care, for community facilities such as water and sewage services. So this is the area in which we are working to bring about what Secretary Freeman calls a rural renaissance.

To begin to come to grips with economic stagnation in their localities, people in about three-fourths of the counties in the United States have organized rural development committees. In the past 3½ years some 10,000 rural development projects have been completed. And the pace is accelerating. These projects have created more than 400,000 new jobs in rural areas.

This is a start -- but only a start. Our re-awakening to the problem of rural poverty -- and the call to action by President Johnson -- means that we must do more, do better, and do it faster. The Department

of Agriculture is charged with leading the way and coordinating the efforts of all government and private agencies.

We need the help and the understanding of all the people in this country. We need to improve our communications with them on this as on all of our work.

I know that we are not going to solve this communications problem overnight. And in these few remarks today, I've covered, as you must realize, only a small part of the problem. I have tried to outline the services of just one -- the newest -- agency of the USDA, and to point out some of the new directions in which I believe our farm and food policies are headed.

If there were time, I would like to tell you about the enormous benefits to this nation from other areas of USDA service -- for example, the vast amount of research in all aspects of production, in marketing, in economics, in nutrition, and much more. There is nothing more vital to all our people than the conservation of soil, water, and forests -- which is another responsibility assigned to USDA. I haven't touched on the credit services, the fantastic amount of statistical work, the far-flung educational services -- nor the market development work both at home and abroad.

But I hope I have made the point that the Department of Agriculture does have a real problem in communicating the range of its programs, services, and responsibilities to the public -- what we do, why we do it, what good it does, and its importance to all the people in this country. Yet we must do so, not only because good communication is in

the interest of good government, but also because the public has a vital stake in these matters -- and should bring its influence to bear on the decisions of policy that will affect the kind of agriculture and the kind of food services we are to have in our nation in years to come.

We did not come by our system of government -- our way of life -- without effort. They will not be retained without effort, either. And so we must not cease nor tire in our efforts to keep open the channels of communications.

For real communication is more than merely passing information from one mind to another. It is the means of establishing relationships between people -- and that is what our government really is -- people dealing with people.

In the last analysis, perhaps good communication is like perfect love -- something never fully achieved but perpetually to be worked for.

We intend to keep striving, in any case -- and we solicit your aid.

#####

